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ABSTRACT

Because news supplied by the broadcast and print media is inadequate, the author suggests that public schools offer courses in how to read the newspaper, watch television, and listen to the radio. He contends that tying news to the classroom lesson for the day would make the lesson more relevant. The author examines the current state of the press and its deteriorating relationship to government and the courts. A free, unregulated press, he says, is democracy's early warning system against democracy's own excesses and the approach of tyranny; and the schools are the first line of defense against tyranny and for the preservation of democracy. (Author/LD)

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REMARKS BY WALTER CRONKITE

NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

MIAMI BEACH CONVENTION CENTER

SUNDAY, APRIL 22, 1979

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Walter Cronkite

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

It is a great pleasure to have this opportunity to meet with you here today. First, because I have a genuine admiration for you who make the considerable sacrifice of time and energy to serve your communities in one of the most important jobs any civilian can assume -- the direction and management of our schools.

And, second, because, in one sense at least, you and I are in the same game -- and we have problems.

We are both in the business of providing the information that will enable the people to intelligently play a role in their society. That translates, in a democracy, to their ability to intelligently exercise their franchise as citizens.

Your job is to train them to think. Ours is to supply the raw material to feed the thinking process. These jobs of ours are completely interdependent. Neither of us can do our jobs properly or adequately if the other does not perform his, and yet, I fear, neither of us is performing up to our potential.

Let me talk first about my job, and what's wrong with it.

What's wrong with it is that we are doing almost too good a job. We in network news present a product that goes into some 60-million or so homes each night. Many millions more see only local broadcasts. Something like 60-percent of the people say they get most of their news now from television.

If that is so, I'm afraid that 60-percent of the people are not adequately enough informed about the workings of their government and the world about them to make the hard decisions that should be theirs as participants in a republic.

It is a question of time, and the nature of the broadcast medium. We are given only a half hour to present the news of the world and the nation. In that time all the words spoken on THE EVENING NEWS, by me and the other reporters and their interview subjects -- all of these words equal the number of words on two-thirds of the front page of a standard newspaper.

Now in that time we do a great deal. Twenty items in an average newscast -- some but a paragraph long true, but all with the essential information to provide at least a guide to our world that day. Film clips that, in a way available to no other daily medium, introduce our viewers to the people and the places that make the news. Investigative reports -- pocket documentaries -- that expose weaknesses in our democratic fabric. Feature film reports that explore the by-ways of America and assure us that the whole world hasn't turned topsy-turvy. Graphics that in a few seconds communicate a great deal of information.

We have expanded to an immeasurable degree the knowledge of a great portion of our people who either cannot or do not read. We have expanded the interests of another, also sizable portion, whose newspaper reading had been confined in the past to the headlines, the sports results and the comics.

We are going into homes of the untutored, underprivileged and disadvantaged; homes that have never known a book. We are exposing them to a world they scarcely knew existed.

BUT -- in our limited time we cannot deliver to them the full details of the more complicated stories from the capitals of the world, from Washington, from their state houses and county courts and city halls AND SCHOOL BOARDS -- the details they need to make an intelligent decision on the performance of their government.

That must be the job of the newspapers, and yet the success of broadcasting has so cut into the advertising revenue of the newspapers that in most American cities only one newspaper, or newspaper ownership, survives.

Despite the best intentions of these monopoly newspapers, they are subject to the sloth of all monopolies, and without a competing newspaper to monitor their performance, they frequently do not provide the full scope of coverage that should be demanded of them.

So on one hand we have an inadequate broadcast medium, and on the other, an inadequate print medium. This is a dangerous trend in a democracy that can only function with a free and complete flow of information to and from its citizens.

This is where our problems interlock -- for the remedy can start with the schools. To assure a more enlightened citizenship, we should have in our public schools courses in how to read the newspaper, how to watch television and listen to radio news. How to avoid the passive, gum-chewing viewing and reading of the news but how, instead, to be properly skeptical of the news reports, how to balance what is said on the air with what is printed in the papers, how to go to magazines and books and reference works to double check the doubtful or unlikely statement.

Thus we could build a population of discerning news consumers who would appreciate the limitations in each media, and, furthermore, appreciate the essential need for all. They would also thus be the best bastion in defense of our freedom of press and speech, for they would have become involved and concerned participants in the process.

Along with this, wouldn't it be helpful if we could urge the teachers to expand the use of newspapers and news broadcasts in all their courses? If the teachers are bright and alert and have read their newspapers and listened to the news broadcasts, they should be able to open almost every class with a reference to the day's news and then, if they are <u>really</u> bright, tie that news to their classroom lesson for the day. That certainly would work with history and economics and geography and languages and sciences and arithmetic and mathematics. Every day there is a relationship between what is happening in that child's world and what is being taught in the classroom.

"Relevance!" We've heard that this is what is missing at school and that is why the young are tuning out. Well, "relevance" is what I'm talking about. The relevance is there to be extracted by every teacher in every subject by the exercise of just a little extra effort to use the daily news as the peg for the day's lesson.

If we can begin turning out better informed young people, with a genuine curiousity about and involvement in the world about them, we can improve considerably the chances of survival of this democracy of ours as it faces the challenges of the remainder of this century and the next.

We face great problems and hard decisions in the years ahead. We have four modern horsemen of the Apocalypse riding down upon us -- uncontrolled population growth, pollution, depletion of natural resources, and atomic proliferation. In subsections under those general categories -- the immediate pocketbook issues: poverty, welfare, inflation, fuel shortages, urban housing, transportation, waste disposal, and the social ones -- drugs, pornography, moral slippage.

These problems strain at our civilization, and the technological revolution develops so rapidly it seems to defy one taming it -- in the lifetimes of most of us here we have plunged into three eras any one of which would be enough to comprise an age of man -- the atomic age, the computer age, the space age.

Who can doubt that we are in a revolution today as deep and profound as the industrial revolution of the last century? To survive that revolution with our democracy intact and vibrant, we have to learn to more carefully examine the institutions which must deal with it -- government, business, labor -- and the relations between them.

This can only be done with a free, a completely free, flow of information on the functioning of those institutions. And yet, at this very crisis point, we are experiencing today a wave of judicial decisions, the effect of which is to severely constrict that flow of information.

The right of the press to protect confidential sources has been progressively dismantled.

The police have been told they may search newsrooms without warning and with nothing more than a judicial warrant.

There has been a growing tendency to bar access by reporters to official, and presumably, public events, institutions and records.

And just last week the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that in a libel action the plaintiff has the right to question the reporter's frame of mind, his thought processes, as he penned the allegedly offensive dispatch. That case in itself may not be so onerous, but the extension of the philosophy in future court decisions could be devastating.

The common theme of most of these inroads on our First Amendment rights of speech and press is that journalists are not a privileged class under the law; that the First Amendment grants them no special rights or sanctions; that the rights given them are the same -- nor more and no less -- than those granted every American citizen. Fair enough, one might say, but can we not see that this means that the public has left no agent, no representative, to challenge the special rights for sanctions that the government and its servants, honestly or dishonestly, reserve unto themselves.

Specific court decisions in the last couple of years have had these specific and dangerous effects:

Reporters have been denied the right to visit a county jail in California where conditions were so notorious that even a judicial commission had labeled them as ghastly.

The Supreme Court's doctrine of no special privilege has inspired judges beyond number to issue "gag" rules to protect court proceedings from what they call prejudicial publicity.

The purpose of this allegedly is the worthy one of protecting an individual's Sixth Amendment right to a fair trial. But the effect is to deny to the public its right to be informed about the fairness of trial proceedings themselves and even the competency of the court. The practice, incidentally or not, permits the operation of our system of justice in secrecy, locked away from public scrutiny. Just like in dictatorships!

The highest court's opinions have led to a rash of denials by lower courts of reporters' rights to protect confidential sources. The principle of confidentiality lies at the very heart of any exposure of misdeeds and corruption in government and our major institutions of business and labor. The concerned citizen or government employee whose tip on malfeasance or misfeasance exposes a corrupt bureaucracy must rely on the promise of anonymity. By stripping reporters of the right to respect that promise a judge can blind the press and protect a regime that he himself may serve.

And during its last term, the Supreme Court produced a constitutional shocker, upholding the right of police to raid the offices of a student newspaper at Stanford University.

The police had been looking for photographs they believed might contain evidence of criminal acts during a demonstration.

None was found. Two lower courts found the search of the newspaper's offices illegal, because police had only a search warrant. The lower court said a subpoena was required for such a search. A subpoena would have given the newspaper an opportunity to argue against the search in court.

The Supreme Court said that a search warrant, which provides for no warning, from which there is no appeal, and which is issuable in some states by a justice of the peace, was enough.

The decision was another serious blow against the First Amendment rights of the press. But it also tore a hole in the rights of all Americans under the Fourth Amendment -- which guarantees the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects against unreasonable searches and seizures.

For most of our history, warrants were limited to searches for "contraband, weapons and plunder" -- a narrow category that usually implied some guilt on the part of the owner. But now the Supreme Court has widened the category by permitting searches for mere evidence, meaning information. And it has said that the homes and offices of innocent third parties...doctors, lawyers, clergymen, businessmen, school board members, as well as newspapers... ar subject to searches with no more warning than a knock on the door and the presentation of a warrant. We are returned by one judicial decision to the days of submission to an autocratic colonial master -- or we are transported back to the Germany of Adolf Hitler.

It is all a very serious business, for the larger government grows, and the more complex the issues become, the greater a democracy's need for an independent press capable of monitoring the government and the performance of its public servants. After all, most of what the government does, it is doing either for us or to us. The rest it is doing in our name. Whatever the case, we need to know -- we are entitled to know.

We in the media must be careful with our power...with what

privileges we manage to hang on to. We must avoid, where possible, actions which make the right of fair trial a difficult right to uphold. We must avoid unwarranted intrusions upon people's privacy. Liberty and, no less, one's reputation in the community, are terribly precious things, and they most not be dealt with lightly or endangered by capricious claims of special privilege.

But above all else, we must avoid acquiescing in the chipping away of First Amendment guarantees of press freedom. For the free press, after all, is the central nervous system of a democratic society. No true democracy, as we understand the term, can exist without it. The press may be irresponsible at times, obstreperous, arrogant; even cruel, when innocent individuals are caught in the rip-tide of damaging publicity. But a free, unintimidated and unregulated press is democracy's early warning system against both the dangers of democracy's own excesses and the approach of tyranny. And, inevitably, one of the first signs of tyranny's approach is the heavy footstep on the threshold of press freedom.

I have dwelt perhaps overlong here on a problem of which I am certain you are aware, for this is a problem that so directly concerns you. Academic freedom ARE A PART of our freedoms of speech and PRESS Our schools are the first line of defense against tyranny and for the preservation of our unique democracy.

With a press improved by an educated public's demand for the truth as nearly as it can be ascertained, with a population schooled to read critically and think independently and to understand the interrelationship in this increasingly complex world of the most remote events with their daily lives we need not fear that our freedom -- or the future of our nation is in jeopardy.

And it can all be made possible only by what you do in the schools of today. It is a heavy, heavy responsibility, and I wish you good luck, for the sake of all of us.

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